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CALL ON I D LAPTEV, EDITOR OF IZVESTIYA, 3 APRIL 1989

SUMMARY

LAPTEV VERY APPRECIATIVE OF INTERVIEW WITH THE PRIME MINISTER. HE WAS POSITIVE ABOUT ELECTIONS, BUT WAS REALISTIC ABOUT DIFFICULTIES IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

DETAIL

2. I CALLED ON LAPTEV THIS MORNING. HIS FULL PAGE INTERVIEW WITH THE PRIME MINISTER WAS PUBLISHED IN IZVESTIYA ON 29 MARCH. HE WAS BUBBLING OVER WITH ENTHUSIASM, AND ASKED ME TO CONVEY HIS WARMEST APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE TO MRS THATCHER. WE REMARKED THAT MRS THATCHER HAD JUST BEEN VOTED WOMAN OF THE YEAR IN A POLL CONDUCTED BY LITERATURNAYA GAZETA.

3. LAPTEV AGREED THAT THE INTERVIEW HAD COME OUT EXCEPTIONALLY WELL. HE HAD RECEIVED NUMEROUS TELEPHONE CALLS FROM ORDINARY PEOPLE THE FOLLOWING DAY TO THANK HIM FOR PUBLISHING THE INTERVIEW. THE NEWSPAPER WAS STILL GETTING LETTERS ON THE SAME LINES.

ELECTIONS

4. LAPTEV THEN TURNED TO INTERNAL SOVIET DEVELOPMENTS. HE HAD ATTENDED GORBACHEV'S MEETING WITH THE MEDIA ON 29 MARCH (MY TELNOS 558 AND 559). BEFORE THE MEETING LAPTEV WAS UNSURE WHAT THE PARTYS REACTION TO THE ELECTIONS WOULD BE. BUT GORBACHEV HAD BEEN QUITE CLEARLY HAPPY THAT HE HAD GOT WHAT HE WANTED. THE RESULTS WERE A CLEAR SIGN OF SUPPORT FOR PERESTROIKA. THE NOTABLE ELECTORAL FAILURES BY PARTY BUREAUCRATS MEANT THAT THE LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE AUTUMN WOULD BE ALL THE MORE IMPORTANT AND INTERESTING. IF PARTY BUREAUCRATS HAD FAILED TO WIN SUPPORT IN THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS THEY WOULD FIND IT EVEN MORE DIFFICULT AT A LOCAL LEVEL. LAPTEV INTENDED TO RUN A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH DEFEATED REGIONAL PARTY FIRST SECRETARIES PRECISELY TO DRIVE HOME THE LESSON OF ACCOUNTABILITY. HE WAS SURE THAT NOW THAT PEOPLE HAD A TASTE FOR ELECTORAL CHOICE, THEY WOULD REJECT UNSUITABLE CANDIDATES AT A LOCAL LEVEL UNTIL THEY GOT SOMEONE THEY WANTED. THEY WOULD NOT HOWEVER, REJECT THE PARTY,

BECAUSE THE POPULATION ACCEPTED THAT MOST PEOPLE IN THE PARTY WERE HONEST. LAPTEV REJECTED THE SUGGESTION THAT PEOPLE WOULD REVOLT IF THEY BECAME IMPATIENT, AS THEY NOW HAD A POLITICAL CHANNEL FOR AIRING THEIR VIEWS.

SUPREME SOVIET

5. VOTERS HAD BEEN GUIDED BY THEIR EMOTIONS AND NOT BY RATIONALITY IN ELECTING ELTSIN. ELTSIN HAD PROMISED TOO MUCH. HE WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE. PEOPLE WOULD SOONER OR LATER ASK "'HOW DO YOU INTEND TO LIVE UP TO YOUR PROMISES.'" LITTLE ATTENTION HAD BEEN PAID TO THIS.

MULTI PARTY SYSTEM

6. LAPTEV BELIEVED THAT FACTIONS AND GROUPINGS WOULD FORM IN THE SUPREME SOVIET IN ORDER TO PUSH FOR PARTICULAR POLICIES. NATIONAL, ECONOMIC OR REGIONAL INTEREST GROUPS WOULD MAKE SPECIFIC DEMANDS OF THE GOVERNMENT (LAPTEV HAD BEEN IMPRESSED BY WHAT HE HAD SEEN OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND HOPED THAT A DEBATING TRADITION WOULD EMERGE IN THE SUPREME SOVIET: RYZHKOV COULD LEARN A THING OR TWO FROM MRS THATCHER'S PERFORMANCE AT QUESTION TIME). HOWEVER, HE THOUGHT THAT A PLURALITY OF PARTIES WAS A DELUSION. POLITICAL PLURALISM WOULD BE DIFFICULT WITHOUT ECONOMIC PLURALISM, WHICH UNFORTUNATELY THE SOVIET UNION DID NOT YET ENJOY. THE SOVIET UNION NEEDED TIME TO CHANGE. IT COULD NOT AFFORD A DIFFERENT GOVERNMENT EVERY 4 OR 5 YEARS AS IN THE WEST.

THE ECONOMY

7. LAPTEV WAS SOBER IN HIS ASSESSMENT OF THE SOVIET UNION'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT MUCH VITAL ECONOMIC LEGISLATION WOULD BE UNPOPULAR, AS WOULD THE REDUCTION IN NEW CAPITAL INVESTMENT. THE IDEA OF THE "'INDIVIDUAL FARMER'" WAS ALSO UNPOPULAR. AGRICULTURAL BOSSES WERE WORRIED THAT THEIR AUTHORITY WOULD BE UNDERMINED BY DECENTRALISATION AND SELF MANAGEMENT: HENCE THE COMPROMISES AT THE AGRICULTURE PLENUM. BUT IT WAS ABOUT TIME THAT MANAGERS TRUSTED THOSE WHO WORKED FOR THEM TO PRODUCE THE GOODS AND NOT WORRY ABOUT HOW IT IS ACHIEVED. THE MAIN SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION AT THE RECENT AGRICULTURE PLENUM HAD BEEN THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP. GORBACHEV HAD TRIED SEVERAL TIMES TO EXPLAIN WHAT HE WAS TRYING TO ACHIEVE. THE MESSAGE STILL FAILED TO GET THROUGH AND GORBAHCEV HAD EVENTUALLY SHOUTED AT ONE SPEAKER. LAPTEV BELIEVED HOWEVER THAT THE MESSAGE WOULD SINK IN ONCE PEOPLE REALISED MONEY COULD BE MADE.

8. LAPTEV ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THERE WERE SIGNIFICANT LIMITS TO CHANGE, WHICH IT WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME. HE HIGHLIGHTED TWO EXAMPLES: HOW COULD YOU SELL LAND TO PEASANTS WHEN THEY COULDN'T AFFORD IT? HOW DID YOU OVERCOME "'IDEOLOGICAL FETISHISM?'" HE

THOUGHT THAT CENTRALISED PLANNING HAD REACHED AN ABSURD LEVEL. WHY, FOR EXAMPLE, WAS THE SOVIET FAR EAST RUN FROM MOSCOW? THE NEXT FIVE YEAR PLAN SHOULD BE INDICATIVE ONLY, NOT A SERIES OF PRECISE DIRECTIVES. GROWTH TARGETS DID NOT NEED TO BE SET. IF REFORM WAS WORKING THEN GROWTH WOULD LOOK AFTER ITSELF. BUT MONETARY, TAX AND PRICE REFORM WERE NECESSARY IF THE ECONOMY WAS TO MOVE FORWARD. AND FIRST OF ALL INVESTMENT AND MILITARY SPENDING MUST BE CUT BACK.

9. LAPTEV WAS CONSCIOUS THAT PEOPLE STILL SAW PERESTROIKA AS FRAGILE. WOULD-BE PROGRESSIVE FARMERS FOR EXAMPLE, STILL HAD THE POSSIBILITY OF A CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT POLICY AT THE BACK OF THEIR MINDS, DESPITE GORBACHEV CONSTANTLY TRYING TO ALLAY THIS FEAR. IT WAS NECESSARY TO GO AS FAR AS POSSIBLE AS FAST AS POSSIBLE IN ORDER TO MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO GO BACK.

10. AS I LEFT, LAPTEV ONCE AGAIN ASKED ME TO CONVEY HIS THANKS TO THE PRIME MINISTER.

BRAITHWAITE

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